

Linking Research and Action

STRENGTHENING FOOD ASSISTANCE AND FOOD POLICY RESEARCH

HIV/AIDS and Food Crises: RENEWAL in Africa

To effectively address the interactions between HIV/AIDS and food insecurity, there's a need to fill knowledge gaps, strengthen capacity, and learn-by-doing in partnership with people who are directly affected.

Access to food was at the heart of the humanitarian crisis that hit southern Africa in 2001–2002. The immediate triggers were climatic, especially flooding and poorly distributed rainfall in the first half of 2001, leading to a marked reduction in food production across the five most severely affected countries. Observers have implicated several underlying and overlapping factors in exacerbating the impact of the climatic stresses. These include deep and widespread poverty, civil strife, land insecurity, removal of price controls, resource degradation, erosion of agricultural diversity, poor governance, muffled press, and civil society. There was another factor, unlike these, that has not been implicated in past food crises—HIV/AIDS.

But what role did AIDS play in this regional food crisis, and what does this imply for current and future responses to AIDS-affected food crises? In order to begin to answer these questions, there is a need to address three principal challenges.

1. Gaps in understanding

Existing research on the interrelationship between HIV/AIDS and food security, and actions derived from it, is limited in several ways. Though there is increasing understanding that the interactions are two-way, much attention remains focused on AIDS' impacts on food security rather than on the other direction, i.e., how food systems, policy, and practice may contribute to the spread of HIV. Second, the dynamics of impact and response at the levels of communities remain under-researched, with much of current studies oriented toward cross-sectional studies of smallholder farming households. Third, too few studies seek to capture and learn from the many innovations that are underway by affected individuals and their communities. Fourth, there is the predominant view that AIDS is so different that it demands completely new programmes, new technologies, new responses. This is dangerous, because it adds to the prevailing sense of hopelessness.

2. Lack of evidence on “what works”

There is very little empirical basis to guide responses. Where organizations have launched actions that address HIV/AIDS-food security links, they have rarely been monitored. Clear operational hypotheses and indicators are seldom stated and followed up on. Strengthening of situation analysis as well as monitoring and evaluation systems, and their integration in intervention design, should facilitate the capturing of lessons learned and verifiable best practices.

3. Limited action

Many actors find difficulty in identifying their particular role in the response to the pandemic. This is partly due to a lack of understanding of the dynamics in their particular sector and/or due to limited insights in appropriate intervention opportunities (numbers 1 and 2 above). National actors (including government ministries) and donors alike have for the most part still not mainstreamed the implications of AIDS into their policy processes. There is a real need for effective mainstreaming and broad collaboration so that the scale, breadth, and depth of response better matches the scale and diversity of the AIDS epidemic.

To address these challenges, the Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods, and Food Security (RENEWAL) was launched in 2001. Facilitated by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR) and with support from the World Food Programme (WFP) and other donors, RENEWAL is a growing regional network-of-networks. Currently active in Malawi, Uganda, Zambia, and South Africa, RENEWAL comprises national networks of food- and nutrition-oriented organizations (public, private, and nongovernmental) together with partners in AIDS and public health.

The first stage in the RENEWAL process involves the preparation of a national situation analysis report by two in-country experts (one on food security, one on public health) that

describes the present situation, apparent trends, and institutional responses to the challenge along with remaining gaps. In the second stage, this report is fed into a multi-stakeholder consultation that involves participation from agricultural and health ministries, research organizations, national AIDS commissions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The conceptual framework in the figure encapsulates the “universe” within which RENEWAL operates and provides guidance.

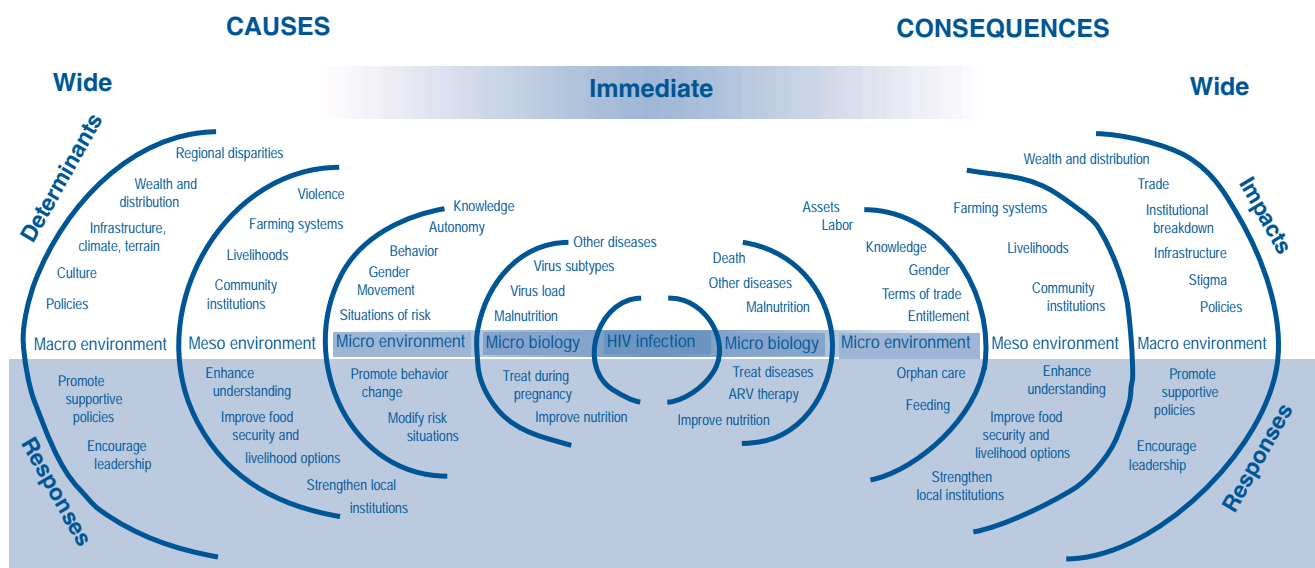
Consultation participants decide on priorities for action research and recommend how the national network should be organized and gov-

erned. In the next stage, these recommendations are then presented to high-level ministers, heads of AIDS commissions, and other senior representatives of government and NGOs, whose buy-in is fundamental for local ownership, relevance, and impact. Calls for proposals, based on the priority themes, are disseminated and studies selected and funded out of country-level Action Research Funds. Around 10 studies on HIV/AIDS and food crises in southern Africa will thus be initiated in early 2004. Most of these seek to enhance understanding of the micro- and meso-environmental interactions (see figure below) and influence

macro-level policy via the communication channels established within the networks. The findings of these studies along with the results of policy reviews and policy “experiments” will be discussed in local, national, and regional fora later in the year.

In the context of the three challenges described above, the process of network development in RENEWAL is both a means and an end. Impact may be enhanced through combining locally-prioritized action research with the strengthening of both capacity and communications.

HIV/AIDS determinants, impacts, and responses



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INSTITUTIONAL CONTACTS:

Food Consumption & Nutrition Division, International Food Policy Research Institute (www.ifpri.org), 2033 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA, Tel: +1-202-862-5600, Fax: +1-202-467-4439 Email: IFPRI-FCN@cgiar.org

World Food Programme (www.wfp.org), 68/70 via Cesare Giulio Viola, Parco dei Medici, I-00148 Rome, Italy, Tel: +39-06-65132628, Fax: +39-06-65132840 Email: Allan.Jury@wfp.org